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SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA'S POST-ELECTION STATE OF MIND

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE TREAT ACCORDINGLY

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The June 17 parliamentary elections were characterized by low voter turnout: 54.67 percent. Robert Fico's Smer was the clear winner across Slovakia, taking 29.14 percent and five of Slovakia's eight regions. Mikulas Dzurinda's SDKU only won the Bratislava region, but it was pleasantly surprised at its best-ever showing. SDKU voters cast more preferential votes for former Labor Minister Iveta Radicova and former Finance Minister Ivan Miklos than for Dzurinda. Over a month after the election, the majority of Slovakia seems to be pleased with the results, including Fico's choice of coalition partners. SNS witnessed an increase in its popularity, while former opposition parties ANO, KSS, and Free Forum were disappointed after failing to achieve the five percent necessary to receive seats in Parliament. After dropping out of the ruling coalition in February, KDH got the lowest percentage of votes of the parties that have made it to Parliament. Although HZDS is happy to be a partner in the governing coalition, it was shocked to earn only about a half of the votes originally expected. The low voter turnout of this election may prove to be a regular trend in Slovakia, as the electorate has become tired of reform and disinterested in politics. However, the election also signals a stabilization of Slovak politics, in which the number of political parties is tapering off. END SUMMARY.

EVERYONE BUT BRATISLAVA ELITE PLEASED WITH RESULTS

2. (U) With 29.14 percent of the vote, Smer was the clear winner in the June 17 parliamentary elections. The party won five of Slovakia's eight regions. In the eastern regions of Kosice, Presov, and Banska Bystrica -- where unemployment is high and the benefits of reform have yet to be felt -- Smer was the victor, with over two times greater support than SDKU in the Presov and Banska Bystrica regions. The Bratislava region was SDKU's only stronghold, where it won 36.1 percent of the vote, and Smer won 21.4 percent.

3. (SBU) According to sociologists, recent polls, and our own personal observations, over a month after parliamentary elections the majority of Slovaks are content with the results, including Smer's choice of coalition partners SNS and HZDS. Intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and urban dwellers in Bratislava seem to be the only ones with grave reservations about the new government. Their largest fear is what some call the "devastation" of Slovakia's image abroad, although several Embassy contacts in the academic community have admitted that the situation in Slovakia will not be as bad as Smer's opponents are predicting.

4. (SBU) Fico and Smer have received criticism from Slovakia's left for not being "true leftists" and now even more so for forming a government with HZDS and SNS. Former President of the Young Democratic Left (MDL) Ivan Stefunko has said that it is "not enough to call yourself a social democrat; you need to act on it and choose your friends accordingly," referring to Smer's choice of coalition

partners. Nevertheless, Stefunko and other leftists are optimistic: "[Smer's] politics doesn't have to be a catastrophe as long as from the beginning the party forms its policies on the basis of what Anglo-Saxons call a 'proper policy-making process.'"

PLEASANT SURPRISES FOR SDKU

15. (U) Although Smer was the clear winner of the elections at a total of 29.14 percent, SDKU was pleasantly surprised to have reached 18.35 percent, surpassing its result in the 2002 election and gaining three additional seats in Parliament. The party far surpassed pre-elections polls, which had predicted SDKU would win a mere 13 percent. Internal party polls had predicted 17 to 18 percent, but the campaign staff hadn't believed them. Chairman Mikulas Dzurinda told the daily Sme that he attributed the positive outcome to a "good campaign" and the fact that the party had "proven itself to the people."

16. (SBU) A recent amendment to the Election Act affected the power of preferential votes. According to the Central Election Commission, preferential votes helped seven candidates from low positions on party lists to make it to Parliament. Preferential votes catapulted Labor Minister Iveta Radicova from her original third position on the SDKU list to the very top. After the preferential votes were counted, SDKU's number one Mikulas Dzurinda fell to the third spot, behind Finance Minister Ivan Miklos. Radicova told the daily Sme that she did not think Dzurinda could perceive her success as a threat, and SDKU insiders say that the surprisingly strong election result solidified his leadership position. However, as Slovakia's PM for the past eight years -- a period characterized by much perceived corruption -- Dzurinda was found to be Slovakia's "least trusted politician" in a recent public opinion poll.

SLOTA HAS REASON TO CELEBRATE

17. (SBU) Although the Slovak National Party (SNS) remains a

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relatively small party, its increased influence is noticeable, having risen to 11.73 percent in the June election and following Smer or SDKU by only a few percentage points in several regions. The majority of this xenophobic party's votes came from first-time voters. Its largest support came from Chairman Jan Slota's home region of Zilina, at 18.8 percent -- second only to Smer. The party had been split into two factions -- SNS and PSNS -- during the 2002 parliamentary elections, preventing either side from gaining the minimum five percent to reach Parliament. Since then, the reunited party has built strength by putting the blame on the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK) whenever Dzurinda's government faltered. In addition, SNS picked up defectors from Meciar's HZDS who opposed a potential SDKU-HZDS coalition.

18. (U) The day after the election, Slota took great pride in the fact that his party had beat SMK -- which had earned 11.68 percent of the vote -- by a whole 0.07 percent. SMK's strength -- followed closely by Smer -- came from the southern regions of Trnava and Nitra, where the populations are largely Hungarian, agriculturally-based, and lower to middle class.

SOME PARTIES SHOCKED BY ELECTION RESULTS

19. (SBU) The defeat of Free Forum -- which had consistently polled over five percent in pre-election polls -- came as a surprise to many, with the party earning a mere 3.47 percent in the actual elections. Pre-election reports had shown that many Slovaks did not know for whom they would vote until they entered polling stations on election day; if this was, in fact, the case, then it appears that last-minute pragmatism motivated Free Forum supporters to vote for the larger and stronger SDKU in order to counter leftist Smer. The daily Pravda reported that the unsuccessful campaign of Free Forum had, in fact, helped SDKU. In a recent interview, Free Forum Chairwoman Zuzana Martinakova told the press that she had most feared Meciar's inclusion in the government and had hoped her party's strength would outweigh his. "Perhaps today the parties that had tried to prevent Free Forum's success are saying to

themselves that they should have let us be," said Martinakova.

¶10. (U) Although Meciar's HZDS is delighted to have been included in the governing coalition, the party was disillusioned by its election results. HZDS received the highest percentage of valid votes cast in the 2002 elections at 19.5 percent. Leading up to this year's election, polls had consistently shown HZDS in the second or third position with 10 to 11.5 percent of the vote, and some members had even expected as much as 15 to 20 percent. In actuality, HZDS won only 8.79 percent and 15 seats in Parliament. Meciar has said that the party will hire an independent agency to analyze reasons for the fall in HZDS support.

¶11. (SBU) Although the drop in popularity came as a shock to Meciar and his allies, other sources note that it had been expected. The English-language weekly Slovak Spectator reported that Meciar had been "slowly burning out" over the past few years, and his otherwise-faithful voters had not understood "why the Father of the Nation would assist Dzurinda in his quest to sell Slovak state assets to foreign corporations, after having spoken so ardently 10 years earlier of the need to create a Slovak domestic capital class." Embassy contacts have called the former PM "a shadow of his former self," who voters had admired for his liquor-swigging, tough-guy persona of the 1990s. SNS leader Jan Slota has retained this good-ol'-boy image, and many of HZDS's traditional voters have changed allegiances to SNS. Frustrated by regional economic inequalities, other HZDS voters have been converted to Smer.

KDH NEEDS TO RETHINK ITS DIRECTION

¶12. (SBU) The Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) received the lowest percentage of votes among the parties entering Parliament, at 8.31 percent. Following the elections, the party suffered internal disputes, mainly over coalition talks (reftel). Several KDH leaders resigned from their positions. Nevertheless, the former deputies remain in the party because splitting up would doom KDH for good. The party will need to rethink its priorities, as both its young voters and progressive clergy have become critical of its often ultra-conservative politics. KDH held an extraordinary congress on July 22, in which Pavol Hrusovsky resigned as Chairman, but then regained his position through reelection anyway. However, the fact that he did not announce his resignation sooner gave no chance to his critics to nominate an opponent.

THE LOSERS

¶13. (U) Feeble results led to changes in the leadership of several political parties that were unsuccessful in earning seats in Parliament. The entire leadership of the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) -- including Chairman Jozef Sevc -- resigned after the party's poor showing in the election: 3.8 percent. The daily Pravda reported that many KSS voters had switched over to Smer. (NOTE: 11 out of the 16 new Cabinet members are former members of the Communist Party. END NOTE.)

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¶14. (U) ANO leader and former MP Eva Cerna announced her departure from the party and from politics shortly after the fruitless election, in which the party earned a trifling 1.42 percent. After five years in politics, Cerna has decided to instead devote herself to social affairs and human rights in the third sector. The future of ANO remains to be seen, although four years out of Parliament and out of the media may keep ANO out of mainstream politics as well. The party has already suffered disappointments in the past, and rumors about the resignation of Cerna and other leaders had been circulating since ANO's failure to win seats in the European Parliament in 2004.

WHY SUCH A LOW TURNOUT?

¶15. (U) Of over four million eligible voters, only 2,335,917 -- roughly 54.67 percent -- placed a ballot in June's parliamentary election. This was the lowest voter turnout in a parliamentary election in independent Slovakia's history, with previous turnout ranging between a low of 70.1 percent in the 2002 elections and a

high of 84.2 percent in 1998. Pre-election polls had, in fact, predicted low turnout, but it ended up even lower than expected. The World Cup and long-awaited summer weather were partly to blame, as were voter discontent with the candidates and general disillusionment with Slovak politics. For the first time in Slovakia's history, polls were only opened for a period of one day instead of two, which may also have contributed to the low turnout.

¶16. (SBU) Campaign analysts suggested campaigns had been boring and many politicians had simply thrown away their chances to persuade hesitant voters to go to the polls. KDH leaders are among those who plead guilty. Their low-key, "personal" approach to campaigning failed to reach most voters and left the leaders exhausted by the time coalition talks started. Analysts criticized all parties for their political ads, which presented no inventive ideas. No attempts were made to attract voters with controversial topics -- as each party had treaded softly to keep from alienating possible coalition partners.

NEW TRENDS IN THE SLOVAK CONSTITUENCY

¶17. (SBU) Lower turnout may be a future trend for the Slovak constituency, which has become largely disinterested in politics. Low turnout has been even more noticeable in regional and local elections over the past few years. On a positive note, however, city voters -- who had traditionally been less likely to vote than their rural counterparts -- have become more enthusiastic, with the highest turnout in Slovakia occurring in the two largest cities of Bratislava and Kosice. During most of the 1990s, educated city dwellers had been largely disinterested in politics, while people in agricultural areas and small villages had been the ones voting for candidates like Meciar on the basis of qualities such as "personal charisma." Although this trend may not have reversed itself totally, it has at least equalized, so that voters from city and country alike are participating in elections.

¶18. (SBU) Another trend that Slovakia may witness in the near future is a "cleaning out" of the party pool. Many voters had been frustrated in part by the overwhelming number of candidates, as 21 parties ran in the election. This number may begin to decrease and the political situation to stabilize, as voters behave in a pragmatic way rather than "throwing away" their votes on minor parties.

COMMENT

¶19. (SBU) COMMENT: In general, Slovaks are in favor of reform, with pro-reform parties collectively receiving a higher number of votes than Smer. When HZDS, which has often supported reforms, is included, reform-based parties constitute a majority. However, many voters had begun to feel left out, both from the benefits of economic reforms and from the political process itself, and many also complained that they needed "a rest" from the often painful reforms. As a result, expectations for the new government are very high. Fico's popularity in the polls is even stronger now than before the election, and many Slovaks are expecting economic miracles. They may become disillusioned when they realize the Fico government will not make any drastic changes or create instant wealth. This may be one reason why Fico named technocrat ministers: they can be easily sacrificed for the sake of Fico's popularity, with no political cost.

VALLEE